

Public inquiries

How can the government ensure inquiries are set up to succeed?



About this report

Public inquiries are taking longer, costing more, and too often failing to deliver meaningful change. This report examines the underlying factors driving delays and rising costs, and highlights the critical role ministers play in shaping inquiries from the outset. It sets out the support ministers need to make better-informed decisions – ensuring inquiries are set up to succeed and restore public confidence.

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Summary

Public inquiries have become a defining feature of the UK's response to crises – from transport disasters and health emergencies to terrorist attacks and deaths in custody.¹ Their prominence in the UK's political and legal landscape has grown considerably in recent years with a record 27 inquiries under way across the UK, and seven more announced by the UK government this year alone.*

At their best, public inquiries can identify lessons and prevent mistakes being repeated. They can also provide an independent account of events and offer accountability, or sometimes for people with a stake in the issue – often survivors, or families of victims – a sense of catharsis. Yet despite more inquiries being called for and established, that are larger and higher profile, and taking longer and costing more, too often the government, public bodies and others are failing to deliver change.

Persistent and regular demands from the public for inquiries reflects dissatisfaction with the wider system. Previous investigations have failed to provide answers; the government, public bodies and officials have failed to be held accountable; and repeated mistakes have been made. Public inquiries are often sought as a last resort. Recent inquiries – into the Post Office scandal, the infected blood scandal, the violence at Orgreave – all followed multiple investigations which failed to get to the root of the issue and extensive campaigns from victims and their families for a public inquiry. This adds to the low public trust in government, particularly in areas where mistakes have been repeated and there has been a failure of accountability. In some instances there has been an unwillingness to engage or there have been attempts to actively obstruct investigations.

Criticisms focus on the cost and length of inquiries, but reform must address the underlying issues that drive these delays and costs. This report identifies the following problems:

- Decisions to establish inquiries are political, but ministers need better support to make these decisions well
- Inquiries often begin without a clear, shared understanding of their core purpose
- Ministers set unrealistic expectations by over-promising what an inquiry can do
- Low public trust makes statutory inquiries the perceived 'gold standard' of inquiry
- Ministers have struggled to secure chairs for some inquiries

* Note that inquiries can be established by ministers in the UK government and devolved governments. In December 2025 the UK government had 19 ongoing inquiries, the Scottish government had six and the Northern Ireland executive had two. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/public-inquiries

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- Limited systematic knowledge-sharing between inquiries means they tend to lean on precedent
 - The combination of leaning on precedent, risk aversion, and political sensitivity discourages innovation

To reform the system of public inquiries the government has two things it must achieve: ministers should make better-informed decisions to ensure inquiries are set up to succeed, and the government needs to rebuild public trust in the system.

The Hillsborough Law, now progressing through parliament, is a long overdue step. It will require public bodies and officials to cooperate with investigations and public inquiries, with the option of criminal sanctions for non-compliance. If successful, this should mean alternative tools are more successful and when an inquiry is needed certain aspects including disclosure will be quicker. The changes should also go some way to improving public confidence in the wider system.

But these reforms alone will not solve the systemic problems. The government has a rare opportunity to make the Hillsborough Law the first step in reforming the system and ensuring inquiries are fit for purpose, that victims of tragedy and state wrongdoing are better served, and lessons can be more easily learned.

Recommendations in brief

Ministers need better guidance to support their decision making

- Ministers are now required to consult a Cabinet Office minister when they are considering establishing a public inquiry. To ensure this leads to better decision making the Cabinet Office should update the Cabinet Manual to include clear, practical guidance for ministers when establishing a public inquiry. The guidance should set out the decisions ministers take to establish an inquiry and key issues to consider.

The government should set out a framework for public inquiries, using it as an opportunity to provide clarity on the purpose of inquiries

- An underlying problem in the way inquiries are used is the absence of a clear and shared understanding – both within government and among the public – of the purpose of public inquiries and what different types of inquiries can realistically achieve. International examples of good practice share a common feature – there is more focus on the purpose of an inquiry when they are established.
- A framework of options for inquiries will help ministers make better-informed decisions in setting up the inquiry and manage public expectations. It should set out the full suite of options available to ministers, depending on whether the core purpose of an inquiry is policy change, lesson learning, reconciliation and truth telling, or a longer forensic inquiry.

The Cabinet Office should be more proactive in gathering and analysing evidence on what works

- At present, the experience of those who have worked on inquiries and have engaged with the Inquiry Unit is mixed, but as the central hub of expertise on inquiries it is best placed to take a more strategic role to fill the evidence gaps – ensuring lesson learning documents are collected and published and working with inquiries to ensure that data, including costs, are provided in a standardised format.
- The Unit should engage more with a wider range of stakeholders – including practitioners, participants and advocacy organisations – who hold valuable expertise and insight into how inquiries are run. Quarterly roundtables with a standing panel from these groups would provide an opportunity to test emerging findings and ideas, and gather input from those working in inquiries. The membership should be updated regularly to ensure a range of expertise and experience is heard.
- The Inquiry Unit should publish an Inquiries Handbook to share best practice, developed through the research and engagement, with chairs, secretaries and inquiry teams as well as officials in sponsoring department inquiry teams.
- To support capacity, sponsoring departments for inquiries should commit to seconding a member of their inquiry team to the Cabinet Office for a short period after an inquiry concludes and the Cabinet Office should publish an updated set of Areas of Research Interest to support external research.

Introduction

Serious matters of public concern in the UK, ranging from major transport accidents to health crises, terrorist attacks and deaths in custody, have been the subject of investigation by public inquiries.² These are investigations that are established by the government, but conducted independently and publicly. Most often they are led by a single chair – usually a former or current senior judge.

Public inquiries sit within a wider landscape of mechanisms designed to uncover what went wrong and why. These include inquests, tribunals and oversight bodies, such as ombudsmen and auditors. All focus on understanding what happened and learning lessons, but in different ways. The focus of inquests and ombudsman’s investigations is smaller, but they can uncover broader issues that may prompt a public inquiry. Additionally, the government can initiate other forms of investigation, such as internal reviews, Royal Commissions and Committees of Privy Counsellors.^{3,4} Court proceedings are part of this wider system but differ in that they are focused on determining legal liability and can deliver judgments and sentences for those found guilty.

Despite this wider landscape of investigative tools, there is persistent and regular demand for public inquiries. This can be in the aftermath of a high-profile or traumatic event where there is strong public desire for an independent account of what happened. Often, however, public inquiries are sought as a last resort. Notably, recent inquiries – into the Post Office scandal, infected blood scandal and events at Orgreave – as well as ongoing calls for an inquiry into the 1994 RAF Chinook helicopter crash, have all followed extensive campaigns from victims and their families for a public inquiry due to frustrations with earlier processes and a lack of transparency and accountability. This pattern underscores a broader context of low public trust in government, particularly in areas where there is dissatisfaction with the process of outcomes of previous investigations, where the government, other public bodies or officials have failed to take accountability. In some instances there has been an unwillingness to engage or there have been attempts to actively obstruct investigations; repeated mistakes have also been made.

The prominence of public inquiries in the UK’s political and legal landscape has grown considerably in recent years. Currently there are 27 inquiries under way across the UK – the highest number on record.* An upward trend in the number of public inquiries has been identifiable for some time. In the 20 years since 2005, 63 inquiries have been launched across the UK, compared with 41 in the 20 years prior. In 2025 alone, the UK government announced it would establish seven further inquiries; the level of commitment to inquiries from both the public and the government shows no sign of decreasing.

* Inquiries can be established by ministers in the UK government and devolved governments. In December 2025 the UK government had 19 ongoing inquiries, the Scottish government had six and the Northern Ireland executive had two. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/public-inquiries

At their best, public inquiries can identify lessons and prevent the same mistakes happening again. They can also provide an independent account of events and offer people with a stake in the issue – often survivors, or families of victims – accountability and a sense of catharsis. Statutory inquiries benefit from specific powers which can overcome some of the compliance challenges faced by other mechanisms of investigation.

Despite this potential, however, inquiries are not working. More precisely, the way in which inquiries are being used as a tool of investigation is not working. There are more inquiries being called for and established, they are becoming larger and higher profile, and they are taking longer and costing more. But still, too often, government, public bodies and others are failing to deliver change, and inquiries are not restoring public confidence. The same recommendations are repeated across inquiries held years apart, with repeat incidents or disasters unfolding. And frustration with the current system is widespread among chairs, survivor groups, legal experts and civil society organisations. This raises doubts about the sustainability of public inquiries as they are currently used, but the consensus for reform among these groups also presents a unique opportunity for the government to make progress on reform.

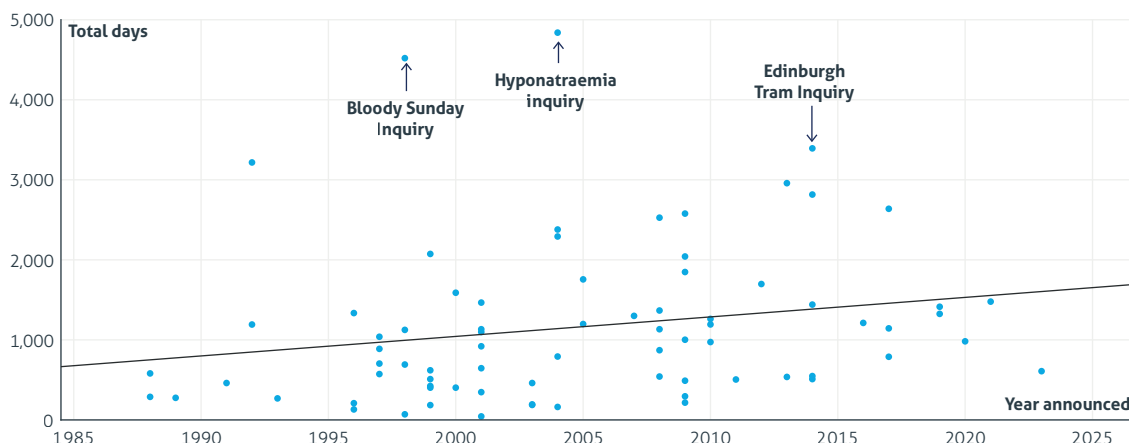
Public inquiries are often seen to be failing because of overarching problems – that there are too many, they cost too much and take too long. These are rooted in deeper, underlying problems, which are exacerbated by decisions made when inquiries are set up. Although public inquiries operate independently, they are established by ministers, who select the chair and set the purpose and scope of the inquiry, which is set out in the inquiry's Terms of Reference. The Cabinet Office Inquiry Team is intended to be the central hub for inquiries knowledge, supporting both the government – in establishing inquiries – and inquiry teams. Early decisions made by ministers have significant and lasting consequences for how the inquiry unfolds. Better support for ministers at this stage would help ensure inquiries are set off on the right path. Criticisms that inquiries have become overly legalistic, too adversarial and are poorly designed to achieve policy change could also be addressed through a more thorough approach to learning lessons from past inquiries and stronger evidence on what works.

Inquiries face problems with cost, time and effectiveness

Inquiries often take years to report

The way in which inquiries are currently being set up and run means they often take years to complete and delay justice and action. While there are more inquiries than ever before, this hasn't translated into lessons about how to make them more efficient; the length of inquiries has been steadily increasing over the past decades. The inquiry into child sexual abuse took over seven years to report. In the seven years between the launch and conclusion of the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire the UK had five prime ministers, seven secretaries of state in the sponsoring department and a general election which saw a change in government. The UK Covid-19 Inquiry, first announced by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson in May 2021, held its first public hearing in June 2023 is not expected to produce its final report until 2027 at the earliest.

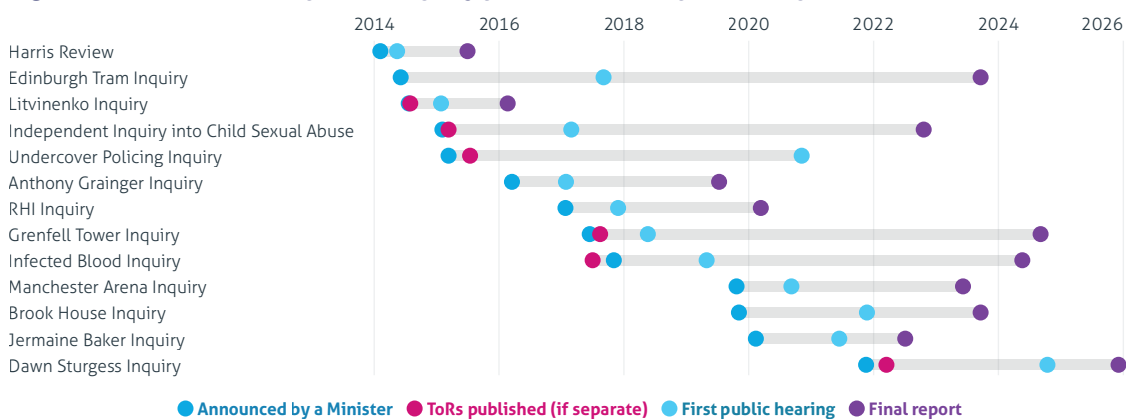
Figure 1 Length of public inquiries in days, 1990–2025



Source: Institute for Government analysis. Notes: Data includes both statutory and non-statutory inquiries. From date announced by the government minister to date of final report. Not including active inquiries.

Some of the delay occurs during the setting up of inquiries. This crucial initial stage is when the government works through considerations such as what the inquiry will cover, what its primary role will be and who will chair it. There is a lot to work through in this initial stage, even more so if the inquiry topic is particularly complex or if there are disputes around the scope of the inquiry, who will run it and how it will be run. Once an inquiry is formally established it can still take a long time before the first public hearing. The ongoing inquiry into undercover policing was established in July 2015 took five years to hold its first public hearing in November 2020. Tension between the Metropolitan Police and the inquiry about what information should be disclosed and how oral evidence would be received caused significant delay.⁵

Figure 2 **Duration of the public inquiry process for completed inquiries 2014–2025**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of public inquiries data, 2014–2025.

Public inquiries are becoming more expensive

Public inquiries also come with large costs for government.* The average cost of inquiries has been increasing. Between 2005 and 2014 the average cost of an inquiry was £8.2 million; in the subsequent 10 years that average cost rose to £69.4m.⁶

Since 2005, £727m has been spent on completed public inquiries. This figure will rise substantially as current inquiries conclude. The Covid-19 inquiry has already cost over £192m, and will soon be the most expensive inquiry ever, surpassing the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday, which cost nearly £200m.⁷ In the financial year 2023–24 alone, the public cost of inquiries was over £130m.⁸ It is difficult to compare costs between inquiries, as costs are not necessarily recorded in a consistent way. Despite the scale of spending on inquiries there is very little evidence-based analysis of what inquiries costs, how they manage those costs and how the spending evolves throughout the course of the inquiry.⁹ This makes it harder to make comparisons and draw out lessons for how inquiries can spend money in a more effective way. At a high level, an NAO report found that the largest component of spending on inquiries – around a third – is legal staff.¹⁰

There are also additional costs, not reported by inquiries but incurred by the government, public bodies and individuals as a result of engaging with the inquiry. The UK government has spent £100m responding to the Covid-19 Inquiry so far, including £56.4m on legal costs.¹¹ These costs can also reflect a lack of preparedness to engage and defensiveness from government departments and public bodies, which both increase costs to themselves as well as inquiries.¹² The cost of engaging with inquiries is exacerbated by the duplication of subject matter, such as between the Penrose Inquiry and the UK Infected Blood Inquiry, and the UK and Scottish Covid-19 Inquiries.¹³ NHS National Services Scotland, which is a core participant in the UK Infected Blood Inquiry and Scottish and UK Covid-19 Inquiries, has established a Public Inquiries Team and since 2021 has spent £9m on legal services.¹⁴

* Inquiries are funded by the government. Those established by ministers in the devolved administrations are funded by those governments.

Lessons and findings from inquiries are not implemented – and the same disasters reoccur

Despite the numerous inquiries that have been carried out, the lessons identified often fail to translate into meaningful, lasting change. Recommendations are acknowledged and reports are published, yet the underlying problems remain. As a result, organisations find themselves repeating the same mistakes, leading to avoidable disasters. To get a sense of range of inquiry recommendations that had been made in the past, the Thirlwall Inquiry examined the recommendations of 29 statutory and non-statutory inquiries from 1994 onwards and found that just 302 of over 1,400 recommendations had been adopted.¹⁵ A House of Lords report found that if the recommendations from the inquiry into deaths at the Bristol Royal Infirmary in 2001 had been implemented, the deaths investigated by the Mid-Staffordshire Hospitals Inquiry in 2013 may have been avoided and if the findings of the 2013 inquest into the Lakanal House fire had been addressed, the Grenfell fire might have been prevented.¹⁶ The chair of the Infected Blood Inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, was so concerned about the lack of implementation of previous inquiry recommendations and earlier investigations into infected blood that he has kept the inquiry open beyond the publication of the final report to monitor the government's implementation of recommendations.* The Grenfell Inquiry recommended that the government set up a publicly accessible record of recommendations that the government should use to track the progress of implementation. The government has since set up a web page,¹⁷ but it does not yet have a comprehensive list of past recommendations; instead, the web page links to inquiry reports or the recommendation dashboard for four inquiries.¹⁸

Problems of length, cost and effectiveness combine to further damage public trust

These issues are not new and were highlighted by the House of Lords in 2014 in post-legislative scrutiny of the Inquiries Act 2005.¹⁹ Since then, inquiries have only become longer and more expensive. However, reform of public inquiries is a difficult area for government. Inquiries are popular with the public, as they are seen as a powerful tool for accountability, and in an era of low trust in government their perceived independence is highly valued by the public.^{20,21} This makes reforms politically fraught and attempts to shorten or reduce their costs risk being seen by the public as a watering down of independence or robustness.

However, the status quo is also damaging public trust in the inquiry system. The sheer amount of time spent on these inquiries mean that political impetus for reform can wane, and those who initiate the inquiry are rarely still in post to see through the recommendations. Lessons are not being learned and applied and policy change is delayed. Victims can spend years campaigning to have an inquiry into an event, only to find they must wait several more years for any inquiry to conclude. Victims of both the infected blood scandal and Grenfell Tower fire were vocal in their concerns that the recommendations of the inquiries would be 'left to gather dust'.²² As such, in recent years there has been growing criticism over the cost and time taken over inquiries.²³

* This is not possible for all inquiries. The chair has only been able to do this because the terms of reference include consideration of the "nature, adequacy and timeliness of the response of government". The chair has interpreted this to mean they can keep the inquiry open while they consider the how the government is implementing the recommendations.

Reform needs to address the underlying drivers

The problems of cost, time and effectiveness are acute, and very visible. However, attempting to fix those problems without understanding the underlying drivers will see efforts to reform inquiries misplaced.

Decisions to establish inquiries are political, but ministers need better support to make these decisions well

Inquiries are principally the tools with which governments can investigate state failures – and are often seen as a last resort for victims and survivors when other avenues have failed. Under the UK system it is ministers who choose when to establish an inquiry and they have considerable leeway to decide what should and should not be the topic of a public inquiry, what it should investigate, who chairs it and what powers it will have.* As there can be significant political and public pressure on ministers to establish inquiries quickly this can lead to inquiries being launched before the terms of reference, aims and model are properly defined. Many of the underlying problems with inquiries are established in the early stages of setup.

Sponsoring departments will set up their own inquiry teams, but it is the Cabinet Office Inquiries Unit, set up in 2019, in response to recommendations from a House of Lords report, that is intended to act as the central hub of expertise and resource on inquiries. Its remit includes sharing best practice and advising departments across government. But to date the Cabinet Office has not always been consulted about decisions to establish an inquiry. In an evidence session with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in February 2025, Darren Tierney, then Director General in the Cabinet Office, admitted that the Cabinet Office – where public inquiry policy and the inquiries unit sits in government – had not been consulted by the Home Secretary in their decision to establish a national inquiry into grooming gangs and the form it would take.²⁴ Instead, the discussion was between the Home Office and No. 10 – completely bypassing the Cabinet Office and the Inquiries Unit, which was set up to be a central knowledge hub on inquiries. The government recently updated the ministerial code to include that ministers contact the Cabinet Office when they are looking to establish an inquiry. However, the guidance that is currently available is limited: the Cabinet Manual, which has not been updated since 2011, contains only three short paragraphs on guidance for ministers on establishing public inquiries.

Inquiries often begin without a clear, shared understanding of their core purpose

Clear articulation of the parameters of what an inquiry is being convened to achieve, and what it can and cannot deliver, is vital from the moment a public inquiry is announced. For some inquiries into matters of public concern, the primary purpose

* The Inquiries Act 2005 gives the government minister – usually the minister with the portfolio closest to the topic – the power to convene an inquiry, appoint the chair and set the terms of reference. The minister may establish an inquiry if it appears that events have caused, or are capable of causing public concern, or there is public concern that particular events have occurred. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/12

may be rapid policy change and implementing lessons; for others, it might be truth-seeking, reconciliation, accountability or establishing a definitive historical record.^{25,26} Yet increasingly public inquiries are expected to achieve many different purposes at the same time. They are expected to learn lessons, deliver accountability and justice, consider redress and bring about lasting change. Increasingly, in what has been termed the 'new politics' of inquiries, inquiries are expected to provide catharsis and social healing.²⁷

These aims are not always compatible, and navigating the trade-offs between them is essential. Yet the difficult conversations about scope and priorities are often avoided by ministers. Sometimes this reflects genuine complexity of the topic or wider context, while at other times it can be a deliberate choice to manage political risk. Either way, avoiding the hard choices at the start leaves the inquiry to find its own way, the result of which can be expansive terms of reference and lengthy, unfocused inquiries that struggle to deliver clear, actionable outcomes. As a result, inquiries try to do too many things, and therefore rarely do them all well.

This is a key criticism of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, which has two main aims: to examine the Covid-19 response in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in order to produce a factual narrative account, and to identify lessons to inform preparations for future pandemics. The first aim is divided into three topics, which together contain 37 sub-clauses.²⁸ To handle the expansive scope of this inquiry the chair has divided the inquiry into 10 modules, the last of which is not likely to report until 2027, five years after the inquiry was established.

Other countries have developed more narrowly focused approaches. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Safety Board conducted their Covid-19 Inquiry.²⁹ This is an independent body that undertakes short investigations on accidents and issues of concern relating to public safety with the purpose defined in law as 'preventing future occurrences or limiting their consequence'. It has legal powers to ensure co-operation with its work and a firm focus on producing lessons, rather than attempting to fulfil wider objectives. In national parliaments that have Committees of Inquiry, investigations can continue alongside legal proceedings on the same matter because the focus is on decisions and lesson-learning, whereas legal proceedings usually target individuals.³⁰ In Australia, there is a clearer distinction between the primary purpose of public inquiries, as forensic, policy or truth-telling, for both non-statutory as well as statutory inquiry processes.³¹ In Canada, the Walkerton Inquiry into an *E. Coli* water contamination outbreak in 2000 was divided into two parts: the first focused on hearing testimony from victims, investigating the specifics of the incident and assigning blame, while the second focused on how to improve drinking water protection in the province.³²

Ministers set unrealistic expectations by over promising what an inquiry can do

Public inquiries are usually welcomed as independent mechanisms to investigate and learn lessons from matters of serious public concern. But once announced, they often attract a wide range of views – from the media, campaigners, victims' groups and politicians – each seeking to shape the scope and process of the inquiry. This means

that ministers often have to manage multiple, sometimes competing, assertions about what the inquiry is for, who it serves and how it should be run. Disagreement is to be expected, particularly when the decision to establish the inquiry is the result of a political battle that has seen victims and the bereaved campaign, often for years, for an inquiry. It also should not be expected that survivors, the bereaved and campaign groups are unified with one shared view. Diversity of voices is both a strength and a challenge. It is how ministers navigate these different views and define the inquiry's purpose at the start that is crucial to whether the inquiry can remain focused and successfully meet its objectives.

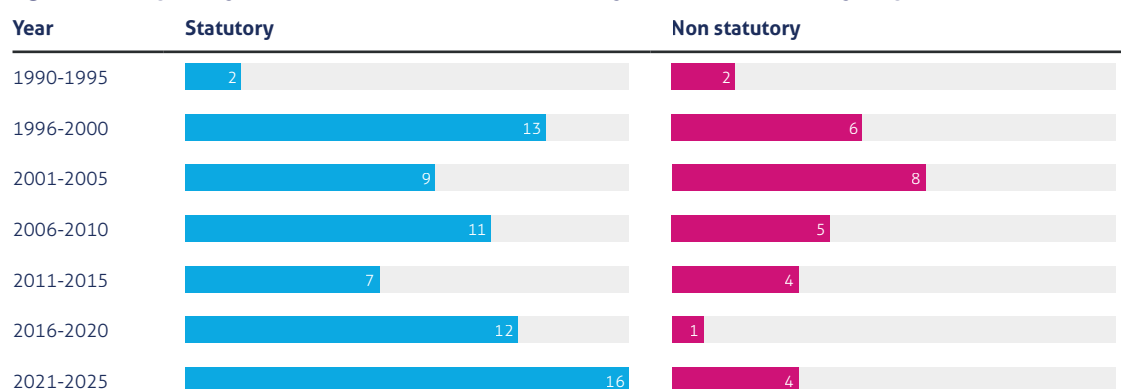
Managing these interests is made more difficult by the absence of clarity and understanding of the purpose of public inquiries.³³ Ministers have to manage multiple, sometimes competing, interests without a clear framework for what inquiries are for. Public confidence is essential, but it can lead to ministers making decisions that prioritise optics over effectiveness – for example, by setting expectations that the scope of an inquiry is to 'cover all bases' rather than focusing on the most urgent, critical questions. Ministers often reach for strong and emotive language – promising that it will leave "no stone unturned"³⁴ and "get to the truth",³⁵ offering up a "judge-led public inquiry".³⁶ This language can feel reassuring in moments of national shock or crisis when ministers feel a responsibility to reassure the public. But the language also conveys a decisiveness that sets expectations beyond what an inquiry can legally and practically achieve.

Public inquiries can establish facts, identify failures and make recommendations, but while the evidence uncovered can impact future legal cases, an inquiry cannot determine civil or criminal liability³⁷ and it cannot guarantee that recommendations will be acted on. Yet politicians often imply that inquiries will provide a level of accountability that is more associated with courts. These statements can also convey an urgency that can be hard to achieve. Issues with the way inquiries are run, as well as delays to disclosure, complex evidence and procedural elements such as the requirement to issue warning letters, can all impact the speed with which an inquiry reports. Overpromising what the inquiry will do, and how quickly it will do it at best leads to disappointment and at worst can be retraumatising to those affected, who have to continue engaging with the process years later. This can also feed wider concerns about government candour and competence.

Low public trust makes statutory inquiries the perceived 'gold standard' of inquiry

When an inquiry is announced, one of the key distinctions that is often portrayed is whether the inquiry will be 'statutory' or 'non-statutory'. Statutory inquiries are so called because they are established under the Inquiries Act 2005, and have greater powers, including the ability to compel witnesses and evidence. Non-statutory inquiries lack these powers and rely on voluntary cooperation. Over time, non-statutory inquiries have become less common – most UK public inquiries are statutory.

Figure 3 **Frequency of announcements of statutory and non-statutory inquiries, 1990–2025**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of government announcements of new inquiries.

Statutory inquiries have faced criticism for being too slow and overly legalistic or formal.

“I wanted it [the Post Office Inquiry] to be non-statutory, purely and simply for speed. These guys had been through enough process and I knew there was nothing that I could say to these people that would support them – they needed action.” Paul Scully, minister for small business (2020–2022)³⁸

The perception that statutory inquiries are slower and more formal is largely driven by the nature of large, high-profile forensic inquiries, which are typically statutory. In reality, cost and duration depend as much on an inquiry’s scope and purpose as on whether it is statutory or non-statutory.³⁹ The drive to run a swift non-statutory inquiry can be derailed if it is later revealed that the inquiry does require powers of compulsion. As a result, inquiries that have been established as non-statutory, including the Post Office Inquiry, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the Edinburgh Tram Inquiry and the Lampard Inquiry, have later converted to statutory inquiries, causing delays to the proceedings.^{40,41}

However, even if not all inquiries require the legal powers afforded in the Act, campaigners for inquiries typically favour statutory inquiries. This reflects the context in which inquiries are established; where repeated investigations have failed to provide answers or prevent mistakes reoccurring, and there has been a lack of candour or accountability from government about what happened. In this context there can be a strong appetite for the powers that statutory inquiries have and their perceived independence over other models. Some non-statutory inquiries, including reviews into maternity care failings, have been successful in achieving public trust. And they can be very effective; one of the most impactful inquiries held in the UK – the Bichard Inquiry (2004) – was non-statutory, took only eight months from launch to publication and resulted in major changes, including the introduction of CRB checks. However, statutory inquiries are still a model that those most impacted by the topic of the inquiry reach for. In recent years we have seen a new pattern of inquiries being ‘upgraded’ to statutory days or weeks later due to pressure from victims and campaigners – as was the case for the Southport Inquiry.

The presence of these two competing narratives means that the focus is often on whether an inquiry is statutory or non-statutory. This disguises two key issues that are failing to be dealt with: that low public trust is a major driver of calls for statutory inquiries, and that choosing the most effective inquiry model must consider the purpose and focus of the inquiry, not just the powers it has.

Ministers have struggled to secure chairs for some inquiries

The Inquiries Act 2005 requires the minister convening the inquiry to appoint and announce a chair to Parliament “as soon as reasonably practicable”, which, in conjunction with political pressures can lead to the process happening quickly.⁴² The often-immense public scrutiny and pressure from victims can also contribute to making finding a chair difficult, if either the media or victims find a chair unacceptable, then their position can quickly become untenable.⁴³

The choice of chair is often a judge, due to a combination of precedent, high level of public trust in the judiciary and a long-standing perception that a legal approach is the most rigorous means of determining facts. Inquiries that been led by someone other than a judge – such as the 2009 Chilcot Inquiry – have faced criticism for being a lesser form of investigation.⁴⁴ Of the inquiries launched since 1990, 64% have been chaired by a judge or former judge. Of the 25 ongoing inquiries with an appointed chair, only two are chaired by someone who is not a current or former judge or lawyer – Rt Rev Dr Pete Wilcox, chair of the Orgreave inquiry, and Baroness Longfield, chair of the grooming gangs inquiry. However, as the House of Lords Statutory Inquiries Committee has pointed out, a judge is not always the most appropriate person to chair an inquiry, and there is a lack of evidence, and therefore guidance, on when a judge versus an expert chair is most appropriate.⁴⁵ A judge-led inquiry can lead to a more legalistic style of inquiry, which can be more adversarial.⁴⁶ There is a perception is that a court room style approach is the most useful way to achieve a comprehensive account of what happened. Yet this is not always the case as former panel member of the Chilcot Inquiry Sir Lawrence Freedman said in reference to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry “interrogating witnesses may provide the spectacle, but in this case, most of the evidence can be gathered away from hearings”.⁴⁷

The choice of inquiry chair and any panel members should be informed by the inquiry’s primary purpose and objectives. A detailed forensic inquiry may require a chair with legal or judicial expertise to navigate complex evidentiary issues, whereas a policy-focused inquiry may benefit from a subject-matter expert as chair or a panel member to shape forward-looking recommendations.* Truth-telling inquiries, by contrast, may require individuals skilled in survivor engagement, historical investigation, and reconciliation.⁴⁸ Ensuring the right expertise from the outset helps maintain focus, supports appropriate procedure and conduct, and helps control cost and duration.

* There are plenty of examples to draw on from other settings. For example, the Independent Commission on UK Public Health Emergency Powers, which investigated the use of emergency public health laws and parliamentary procedures in the four UK nations in the pandemic and made recommendations, had commissioners from across a wide range of disciplines (<https://binghamcentre.biicl.org/publications/final-report-of-the-independent-commission-on-uk-public-health-emergency-powers>)

There have been several inquiries where the chair has had to step down due to perceived conflicts of interest. The inquiry into child sexual abuse, established in 2014, saw the first two chairs step down within a matter of months after victims raised concerns around their links to former politicians.^{49,50} The government subsequently reconstituted the inquiry as statutory and appointed Dame Lowell Goddard, a New Zealand judge, in 2015. In 2016 she resigned, citing in part the difficult start the inquiry had, writing in her resignation letter “Compounding the many difficulties was its legacy of failure which has been very hard to shake off and with hindsight it would have been better to have started completely afresh”.⁵¹ The current inquiry into grooming gangs faced difficulties selecting the chair. Two candidates, Jim Gamble and Annie Hudson, withdrew themselves from consideration due to lack of trust from survivors.⁵² These issues are in part due to the scale of state failure with issues of child sexual abuse. When so many aspects of society, politicians, police and the legal system, among others, have contributed to the scandal, finding an appropriate chair who is not part of those professions can be difficult, and victims may respond negatively to a chair drawn from a profession seen to have failed them.

Limited systematic knowledge sharing between inquiries means they tend to lean on precedent

Public inquiries in the UK operate with surprisingly little systematic knowledge sharing and we know remarkably little about the internal working of inquiries – how they are set up, how they are run, and how decisions about form and procedure are made, and the impact of these decisions.⁵³

It is a well-known issue that once the terms of reference have been fulfilled an inquiry ceases to exist, and valuable institutional knowledge can be lost – for both successful and unsuccessful practice.⁵⁴ Inquiry teams tend to build their structures, procedures and working methods anew each time, drawing largely on personal experience or informal advice networks rather than any shared institutional memory. The result is that there is very little systematic analysis of best practice to inform how new inquiries approach their work. There is also a lack of shared knowledge and experience between chairs and inquiry teams about how they have responded to challenges – chairs and secretaries we spoke to felt they were starting from scratch with little support. The Grenfell Inquiry faced a number of issues at the very start with core participant status, which could have been avoided if they had looked at best practice, for example from the Infected Blood Inquiry. The consequence is slow and costly start-up phases, inconsistent approaches and uneven participant experiences.

There are more fundamental issues that are caused by a lack of evidence and analysis of the way in which inquiries work. Despite the flexibility allowed in the Act for chairs to run their inquiry in a range of different ways, in practice processes become entrenched and tend to lean on precedent in day-to-day working – such as adopting a quasi-legalistic format – without fully questioning whether these approaches are appropriate for the specific inquiry. One example is how much of an inquiry takes place in public: the Grenfell Inquiry held almost 400 days of public evidence sessions and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry has held over 200 so far. In comparison, the Bichard Inquiry – considered an effective and impactful non-statutory inquiry held only 16. In other countries, which have more focused inquiries, they hold very few days of

public evidence sessions. For example, the New Zealand Royal Commission held five public days, and the Swedish and Dutch inquiries had none. While inquiries held under the 2005 Inquiries Act must operate in public, it is still a choice to hold so many, and such wide-ranging, public sessions. There is a growing expectation of openness, both among the public and in the courts. Families of the victims of Dr Shipman and media organisations successfully overturned a government decision to hold the inquiry in private, arguing that to do so would be a breach of article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. While subsequent judgements show the legal argument is far from clear, there is now an expectation that major inquiries are held in public.⁵⁵ Yet this choice is not being informed by evidence about what is most effective, or appropriate for that inquiry. Other models could operate very differently from what we have come to expect of inquiries in recent decades, but a lack of evidence and analysis of different ways of working means that inquiries lean on precedent and existing practice and there is not enough consideration from inquiry teams, or indeed ministers at the outset, of how inquiries could be run fundamentally differently.

Calls for more consistent knowledge sharing, including a central Inquiries Unit in the Cabinet Office or the submission of lessons-learned outputs from inquiries have been made, but only partially implemented. Although Cabinet Office guidance requires each inquiry secretary to produce a lessons-learned paper for future inquiries, these are rarely written or published – despite at least 25 minister-convened inquiries completing their work since the guidance was introduced, very few have been produced.⁵⁶ The Inquiries Unit has collected other documents, including case studies, and has a digital inquiries hub which includes some guidance and templates for inquiries. However, there are issues with collating, publishing and sharing experience and the experience of inquiry teams is mixed. Among those we spoke to, some have engaged with this and found it helpful, others have not.

The combination of leaning on precedent, risk aversion, and political sensitivity discourages innovation

A lack of knowledge sharing, coupled with political sensitivity in the system, also discourages innovation – no inquiry wants to be the one that gets something wrong. This creates a culture where chairs and inquiry teams can be reluctant to explore new methods. Yet inquiries have a lot more scope to innovate than most other forms of investigation – even statutory inquiries established under the Inquiries Act 2005 have more flexibility than is often utilised. Some inquiries, led by chairs who are particularly interested in trying new methods, have developed innovative approaches: for example, engaging with vulnerable witnesses (Muckamore Abbey Inquiry),⁵⁷ digital engagement (Leveson Inquiry) and phased reporting (Manchester Arena Bomb Inquiry). But these lessons, and the why and how of these decisions, are not currently being shared consistently. There are also other innovations being tested elsewhere – for example the use of AI to speed up the process of going through disclosure evidence – which inquiries could benefit from but have not yet implemented. A key problem is that it is being left to individual inquiries and chairs to test and learn, and some are better at this than others.

The Hillsborough Law is a starting point for reform

The Public Office (Accountability) Bill, known as the Hillsborough Law, is currently making its way through parliament. The background to the legislation is a long and arduous campaign by survivors and families of the victims of the Hillsborough disaster. In the aftermath of the disaster, police officers have been found to have lied and changed witness statements, and subsequent investigations and inquiries were undermined by a lack of candour from public officials. If the bill passes it will introduce a new duty of candour and of assistance to inquiries and inquests. Public officials will have an 'always on' duty to act with transparency, candour and frankness, and officials who intentionally withhold information over failures may face criminal charges. If this works as intended, it should improve internal investigation processes and mean more issues will be revealed and resolved before there is a need for a public inquiry.

The ancillary duty to assist will extend to non-statutory inquiries established by a government minister. Public authorities and officials will be required to proactively engage with an inquiry.⁵⁸ When an inquiry begins, the chair will be able to request position statements from public bodies and officials, setting out their position on matters relevant to the inquiry. The use of position statements should also speed up the disclosure process for an inquiry, as they help the inquiry work out what is in dispute and what is not.* If effective, these changes should mean alternative tools are more successful, and when an inquiry is needed certain aspects, including disclosure, will be quicker. The changes should also go some way to improving public confidence in the wider system.

A second impact of these new duties is that they effectively give inquiries that have not been established under the Inquiries Act 2005 greater powers. The government, public bodies and officials will be compelled to engage with the inquiry – although this does not apply more widely to corporations and other individuals. In effect, this puts what has been perceived as a two-tier system of statutory and non-statutory inquiries on a more even footing.

The government has also recently amended the ministerial code. Ministers are now required to consult with a Cabinet Office minister before seeking the Prime Minister's agreement to set up an inquiry.⁵⁹ This will go some way to ensuring that the establishment of inquiries is better informed at the centre of government.

These changes present a valuable opportunity for wider reform. There is no inherent reason why inquiries must take years or cost hundreds of millions of pounds to affect change. Yet for reform to be effective it needs to be targeted at the right problems. Current practice means that inquiries are set up without a clear focus on purpose

* UEFA Review into the Champions League disaster – requested position statements from around 30 stakeholders within a week of convening to be sent back within 14 days.

and difficult trade-offs are not made, leading to unrealistic expectations. As a result, important decisions about the form and scope of the inquiry and who will chair it are not underpinned by a solid understanding of purpose and aims. Inquiries are being left to find their own way, which frequently results in lengthy, complex processes that struggle to deliver timely recommendations or answers for those directly affected. There is a broad consensus among those impacted by and working on inquiries that the status quo is untenable. Reform is necessary, and it is entirely possible.

International experience demonstrates that successfully changing the approach to public inquiries is entirely possible. In New Zealand, concerns over a complex and inefficient system of unwieldy non-statutory inquiries prompted significant reforms of the way inquiries were set up and run. It introduced a new framework, which sets out different options appropriate to different types of inquiry. Alongside this it has produced detailed guidance for ministers and officials to support decisions on the purpose, scope and form of inquiry. As a result, inquiries are often more focused and typically take just 18 months – and with the option to be even faster – allowing lessons to be implemented swiftly. The Netherlands has adopted an accelerated review process. The Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid (OVV) has a mandate to initiate investigations across a range of different sectors and focuses on understanding the underlying causes and identifying lessons, which is well suited to the investigation of smaller individual incidents that it often undertakes. The OVV also undertook three separate Covid-19 inquiries between June 2020 and October 2023, with recommendations already being implemented. Australia, meanwhile, has introduced ‘implementation monitors’ for some inquiries – experts employed to ensure that inquiry findings are translated into policy proposals and to keep up momentum on implementation to affect real-world change.

Recommendations

The system of public inquiries is not working in its current form. Campaigning groups, legal charities, academics and the policy community are advocating change. Inquiry chairs are becoming increasingly outspoken with their own concerns.* If reform is pursued well, there is an opportunity to bolster public trust *and* improve effectiveness. To do this, reform needs to focus on addressing the underlying challenges set out above.

Measures such as implementing time limits or cost limits are too small to have enough impact, and on their own will not tackle the underlying challenges. Even when timelines have been included they have had to be extended – the Post Office Inquiry’s original timeframe to report in Autumn 2022 was significantly delayed due to the government and other organisations not being ready to respond to the inquiry.⁶⁰ At the same time, a full overhaul of public inquiries is not necessary – the statute already allows more flexibility in terms of practice than is currently used. And a full overhaul that is not underpinned by a strong justification for change risks being seen as a cover-up by government.

Ministers need better guidance to support their decision making

Reform should start with the recognition that the decision of whether to establish a public inquiry is inherently a political one, made by ministers. What follows is a series of decisions on the purpose, scope and form of an inquiry which are made by ministers before an inquiry is formally established and run independently. Inquiries are sponsored by individual departments, which means different ministers are taking these decisions across government. Inquiries that are already under way or have recently been announced are sponsored by a range of departments including MoJ, DHSC, NIO, MoD, DfT and the Home Office.

There is currently insufficient clear and accessible guidance available to support ministers as they take these crucial early decisions. In New Zealand, where inquiries are more focused and targeted, a key aspect of reform was developing more detailed guidance for ministers, and the officials who work for them, when setting up inquiries. The Department for Internal Affairs runs sessions with sponsoring ministers to run through different options and the considerations of each. The Cabinet Office Inquiries Unit has had mixed success in engaging with ministers. The recent change to the ministerial code will mean that ministers should now contact the Cabinet Office before establishing an inquiry. To ensure this leads to better decision-making **the Cabinet Office should update the Cabinet Manual to include clear, practical guidance for ministers when establishing a public inquiry.** The guidance should set out the decisions ministers take to establish an inquiry and key issues to consider.

Individual departments also have their own inquiry teams, but as the central hub for public inquiries many of the recommendations are aimed at the Inquiries Unit.

* For instance, Sir Brian Langstaff has stated that the Infected Blood Inquiry will remain open until Sir Brian is satisfied that the Government is making an adequate response.

The government should provide greater clarity on the purpose and types of public inquiry

A significant underlying problem in the way inquiries are used is the absence of a clear and shared understanding – both within government and among the public – of the purpose of public inquiries and what different types of inquiries can realistically achieve. International examples of good practice share a common feature – there is more focus on the purpose of an inquiry when they are established.

The government should set out a framework for public inquiries. The framework should set out different options for inquiries – using the full suite of options available to ministers – depending on whether the core purpose of an inquiry is policy change, lesson learning, reconciliation and truth telling or a longer forensic inquiry. Provisions included in the Hillsborough Law will mean that inquiries primarily focused on the government and public bodies will have the built-in reassurance of a statutory duty of compliance. This opens up a wider range of options for ministers, providing an opportunity to think more carefully about the most appropriate form of inquiry. These options should be explicitly designed around the types of problems inquiries are intended to address: for instance, a failure within one NHS trust will require a different approach to an inquiry into a systemic, long-term institutional cover-up.

The framework creates a decision point for ministers where they need to consider the purpose of the inquiry and the most appropriate model to achieve that. Guidance for ministers and officials will support this decision-making. Together, this creates a space to take some of the heat out of the early decision-making and consider different options, moving away from what has become a one-size-fits-all model for inquiries. This will help ministers make better-informed decisions in setting up the inquiry and manage public expectations.

This is the basis of the New Zealand reforms in 2013, which now have three categories – government inquiries, public inquiries and Royal Commissions – which vary in scale, time and cost.⁶¹ Although the impetus for reform in New Zealand was different – there they wanted to tackle the sharp rise in non-statutory inquiries – the introduction of a framework which sets out three distinct options of statutory inquiry alongside more flexible rules for inquiries has resulted in a move away from the dichotomy of a “bells and whistles commission on the one hand and a non-statutory ministerial inquiry on the other”.⁶² This structure, alongside detailed guidance on the different considerations of the choices ministers have to make has helped ministers set clearer parameters early on and provided a better fit between inquiry type and the issue at hand. A similar approach in the UK, supported by detailed guidance on each category, would strengthen decision-making, while providing the public with greater confidence that ministers have taken well-informed decisions to ensure the inquiry is set up to achieve its aims. It would enable both shorter, sharper inquiries, and longer more forensic inquiries where appropriate. Further work is needed to determine the sub-categories, but as an example in New Zealand government inquiries have handled topics such as SAS operations in Afghanistan and drinking water contamination, while Royal Commissions have been used for their Covid-19 Inquiry and inquiry into attacks on mosques in Christchurch.

Table 1 **Number and cost of inquiries in New Zealand since the Inquiries Act 2013**

	Number held	Total cost	Average cost	Average time	Examples
Royal commission	3	\$49.1m (£21.5m)	\$16.4m (£7.2m)	20 months	Covid-19 (Phase 1 & 2) Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Mosques
Historical Abuse in Care Royal Commission	1	\$180m (£78.9m)	\$180m (£78.9m)	7 years	Historical Abuse in Care
Public Inquiry	1	\$3.9m (£1.7m)	\$3.9m (£1.7m)	18 months	Earthquake Commission Performance
Government inquiry	10	\$31.4m (£13.8m)	\$3.5m (1.5m)	10 months	SAS Operations in Afghanistan Drinking Water Contamination Response to Severe Weather Events

Source: The Department for Internal Affairs, New Zealand Government. Notes: Costs have been adjusted to 2025 terms and GBP terms are accurate as of April 2025. The DIA does not hold data on costs for one government inquiry administered by another department; the total cost is for nine inquiries. The average cost and length of time for Royal Commissions is skewed by the inquiry into Historical Abuse in Care and so it is included on its own line.

The Cabinet Office should be more proactive in gathering and analysing evidence on what works

At present, the experience of those who have worked on inquiries and have engaged with the Inquiry Unit is mixed, but as the central hub of expertise on inquiries it is best placed to take a more strategic role to fill the evidence gaps – ensuring that lesson-learning documents are collected and published and working with inquiries to ensure that data, including costs, are provided in a standardised format.

The Inquiries Unit in the Cabinet Office has reported on some of the activity it undertakes, including a digital inquiries hub and quarterly meetings with inquiry secretaries and sponsorship teams.⁶³ However, inquiry chairs and teams report a mixed experience of support available. Many were unfamiliar with the Unit’s role or found its guidance limited.⁶⁴

The **Inquiries Unit should adopt a more strategic and consistent approach to evidence gathering and analysing what works.** It must actively work to engage with ongoing inquiries to ensure that these documents are being created and are promptly published. It should also work with inquiries to make other key information available in a standardised format – for example, consistent reporting of inquiry costs to allow comparison across inquiries.

The Unit should also engage more with a wider range of stakeholders – including practitioners, participants and advocacy organisations – who hold valuable insight into what works. This expertise can help support the analysis of evidence produced by inquiries. The Cabinet Office should convene quarterly roundtables with a standing panel drawn from these groups, with membership updated regularly to include those engaged with ongoing inquiries. These roundtables should be used to test emerging findings and gather further input. This research should form the basis of **updated guidance for ministers on establishing a public inquiry**, in the form of an Inquiries Handbook.*

* As recommended by other organisations including Institute for Government (2017) and Statutory Inquiries Committee (2024).

To support capacity, **sponsoring departments for inquiries should commit to seconding a member of their inquiry team to the Cabinet Office** for a short period after an inquiry concludes, allowing operational learning to feed directly into the Unit's work. The Unit could also look at ways of enabling more external research to support its own efforts and the Cabinet Office should publish an updated set of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs). The current ARIs date from 2019 and do not include public inquiries, making it harder for academics to secure funding for research on this subject.

Annexe: List of public inquiries December 2025

Public inquiry	Date announced	Date terms of reference published	Government department	Government	Legislative basis	Chair
Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry	17 December 2014	01 May 2015	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lady Anne Smith
Undercover Policing Inquiry	12 March 2015	16 July 2015	HO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Sir John Mitting
Infected Blood Inquiry	3 November 2017	02 July 2018	CO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Sir Brian Langstaff
Scottish Hospitals Inquiry	17 September 2019	15 June 2020	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Brodie
Sheku Bayoh Inquiry	12 November 2019	21 May 2020	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Bracadale (stood down October 2025)
Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry*	10 June 2020	01 June 2021	BEIS (now DBT)	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Sir Wyn Williams
Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry	8 September 2020	01 September 2021	NI Executive	NI	Inquiries Act 2005	Tom Kark
Urology Services Inquiry	24 November 2020	31 August 2021	NI Executive	NI	Inquiries Act 2005	Christine Smith
UK Covid-19 Inquiry	12 May 2021	28 June 2022	OPM	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Baroness Hallett
Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry	30 August 2021	01 December 2021	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Brailsford
The Angiolini Inquiry	22 November 2021	10 January 2022	HO	UK	Non-statutory	Lady Elish Angiolini
Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan	15 December 2022	15 December 2022	MoD	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Justice Haddon-Cave
Omagh Bombing Inquiry	2 February 2023	21 February 2024	NIO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Turnbull
The Lampard Inquiry*	28 June 2023	10 April 2024	HSC	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Baroness Lampard
Malkinson Inquiry	24 August 2023	26 October 2023	MoJ	UK	Non-statutory	Judge Sarah Munro
Thirlwall Inquiry	30 August 2023	19 October 2023	HSC	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Lady Justice Thirlwall
The Eljamel Inquiry	7 September 2023	02 April 2025	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Weir

(continued on next page)

Public inquiry	Date announced	Date terms of reference published	Government department	Government	Legislative basis	Chair
Cranston Inquiry	9 November 2023	11 January 2024	DfT	UK	Non-statutory	Sir Ross Cranston
Emma Caldwell Inquiry	7 March 2024	09 December 2025	Scotland Exec	Scottish	Inquiries Act 2005	Lord Scott
Patrick Finucane Inquiry	11 September 2024	Not yet published	NIO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Sir Gary Hickinbottom
Southport Inquiry	21 January 2025	7 April 2025	HO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Sir Adrian Fulford
Manston inquiry	12 February 2025	12 February 2025	HO	UK	Non-statutory	Sophie Cartwright
Nottingham Inquiry	12 February 2025	22 May 2025	MoJ	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Her Honour Deborah Taylor
Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs	16 June 2025	Not yet published	HO	UK	TBC	Baroness Anne Longfield
Orgreave Inquiry	21 July 2025	Not yet published	HO	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	Rt Revd Dr Pete Wilcox
Leeds NHS Trust Inquiry	20 October 2025	Not yet published	DHSC	UK	TBC	
Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Trust Inquiry	11 December 2025	Not yet published	DHSC	UK	Inquiries Act 2005	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of public inquiries data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/VSZQb/4/>. Notes: Inquiries marked with * were converted from a non-statutory to a statutory inquiry. Sir John Mitting has announced his intention to retire from the Undercover Policing Inquiry once a replacement is found.

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